

The artificially intelligent business of big data

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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Matthew Barclay of Meltwater, Brett St Clair of Barclay Africa and Justin Spratt of Uber SSA kicked off IMC Conference 2017 at the White Space in Red & Yellow School Cape Town with a session focused on big data, how AI will fundamentally change the world of work and its specific business implications.

Integrated Marketing Communications or IMC Conference MC Di Charton welcomed a full room of the country's brightest marketing minds on 1 June 2017, speaking of Red & Yellow as her 'new home for the last five years', while the IMC conference has been going since 2010.



Barclay, Spratt and St Clair.

Charton explained that sponsors for the conference were carefully selected, with IBM emerging as a cognitive thought leader and Meltwater encouraging all to follow in their footsteps by benchmarking, listening and engaging in real-time. The day's topics were then split into themes with speakers involved in panel discussions as well as live Q&A sessions based on attendees' Twitter questions as a way to successfully keep attendees engaged.

The first speaker of the day was the red-sneakered Matthew Barclay, area director for Africa at Meltwater, on 'the tools of tomorrow's marketer: Automated anomaly detection in big data'. We all want to understand data and talk about it all the time, but Barclay said it's more than a collection of buzzwords - though the three main ones are: Big data, AI and anomaly detection. In revealing previously unknown connections, we can better understand why a customer purchases from a specific location or at a certain time of year, therefore making connections between data points we wouldn't have understood before and smarter marketing decisions.

Barclay mentioned using the four Vs of volume, velocity, variety and value as qualifying criteria, then played a brief video by PWC director Ken Kryst on big data projects and how to better target your advertising to reach your consumers more effectively. Barclay concluded that **we simply don't have the human resources to effectively make sense of big data in the timeframe society demands.**

Advertising by algorithm

This led into a discussion of the second buzzword Barclay identified - artificial intelligence or AI. Noting your perceptions vs the reality are important here as many in the industry fear their marketing jobs will be taken over by robots in the next few years – Barclay reassures us this isn't true. That said, there is amazing technological development focused on the most effective advertising solutions. Take M&C Saatchi London, for example, which created the world's first poster that evolves and generates new, unique adverts based on how much attention it attracts - this involves customising aspects such as text size, image types and colours and length of copy as the billboard understands what you are looking at, feeds that into the system and changes what it shows you.

Barclay says this brings up interesting questions on creativity and whether it can create unique advertising based on the data it picks up down the line. From the context of SEO, when creating content he says to think of Google's new [RankBrain AI algorithm](#), which serves results based on your specific browsing history and what it thinks you will be interested in looking at when entering a specific search term.

Looking at AI in CX, Barclay says this will become a major brand differentiator. Think of the rise and use of chatbots, which create a scenario where an SA online store or interactive website can chat to someone in any country logging on in a different time zone. They don't need to wait for your open hours, they can chat to your business and even complete transactions when suits them best to do so.

Even more jaw-dropping is the fact that the following video from Cornell University of two chatbots conversing with each other is already five-years-old, showing that human-like traits like memory and crafting responses around what is being said are possible in technology:

For AI in targeting then, Barclay says this will be based on prediction rather than on purely historical data or cookies. Technology surrounds us, delights and surprises us, such as when our phones prompt us to leave home early to skip traffic, or Netflix predicting what shows we will like based on what we've been watching.

He concluded that anomaly detection takes this a step further by only notifying you of a change in the pattern of that data for business insights - that's why it's the way of the future.

The milliseconds of micro moments

Brett St Clair, ex-Google now head of digital product at Barclay Africa, next at the podium on the topic of using just one click to sell anything, without ever needing to physically interact with consumers.

He said that disrupting digitally means literally changing how we work by focusing on the customer. We think of 'digital' as websites and mobile, but that's the old digital. Now, 'digital' lies in the fact that the internet comes with you, so you can share your story from a device that's becoming ubiquitous as the world changes, and that change is based on the era of the selfie.



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The world has been flipped on its head, with St Clair pointing out that Barclay had demonstrated this first hand by taking a selfie of himself with the attendees – we are understanding the context of the consumer, what they are doing and what their world looks like as we enter these micro moments. They are happening by the billions across your audience, so you need to be there when they are ready to purchase your product. That's why he says your customer is always just a click away, and that we need to use real-time analytics to best understand how they consume our content.

It's a process where you never need to even see the customer in real-life. On scaling moments with AI, it's an industry that's been going for 50 years, in understanding how humans communicate with machines, developing consciousness and learning at scale as they progress. St Clair says this is selling of the future. On straight-through processing, it's a one-click experience based on building delightful experiences. Airlines all sell seats, and whatever your industry, it's a commodity once you scrape away the glitter, so how do you differentiate yourself? Facebook creates hyper-personalised environments using algorithms available through the cloud.

St Clair left us with three tips for getting this right:

1. **Shopify everything.** Algorithms are freely available, there's no need to start from scratch.
2. **Hire him or her** – seriously. UX designers are the future of business.
3. **Try this** – you need to be on the bleeding edge of technology, using Snapchat, and Instagram and everything else that comes along. It's changing the way we communicate and collaborate so we need to “get uncomfortably excited”.

Listen to St Clair's CliffCentral [Futurology](#) podcast for more.

Redesigning the customer experience

Australian Justin Spratt, headhunted by Uber to become their head of business for the sub-Saharan Africa region, rounded out the first session of the day by speaking of tech trends and Africa: seeing around corners as well as how software is 'eating the world', with Amazon as the poster child for this. Spratt kicked off with a reminder that Africa is mobile-first, with 90% mobile penetration at this stage and 50% smartphone penetration expected by 2018. Interestingly, many in this market buy *dark phones*, where data is turned off on the smart phones and internet is only accessed in Wi-Fi zones. "Nothing is impossible here; you need to stretch your imagination to reach the masses," says Spratt.

Linked to this, brands need to reset how they brand themselves, especially when it comes to consumer trust. It's a real challenge as brands are being disintermediated over time and it's no longer about brute-force balance sheets, it's now about the bits.



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Spratt adds that VR is immersive and that progress happens at the edges, so while VR quite literally just looks like a toy for now, it has the potential, for example, to change education in Africa in the next decade. He says a well-designed product and communication can get you anywhere, but you'll probably need to redesign how you engage with customers to get this right. Spratt ended with the assertion that media, as the new opium of the masses, needs to insert itself in the process and drive trust in products.

In a panel discussion with all three speakers, Spratt said direct, highly relevant marketing will continue apace, with St Clair explaining that branding is currently fairly static. The culmination of machine learning and big data for relevance thus needs to be balanced with personal data that helps you better respond to consumers and tweak your messaging on the fly. Barclay chipped in that the 'creativity element' is still relevant but marketers need to now push the opportunity to see, putting

the budget behind promoting the amazing content they create through that advertising clutter.

On digital disruption, St Clair said it's easy to say your company 'fails fast', but not so easy to iterate as it requires constant change and effort in AB testing. Any business has the capacity to do so, provided you put in the effort and passion required to continuously disrupt and look for a better way of doing business.

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ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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